

October 4, 1968

Mrs. John B. McInnis
1835 Roberta Drive
San Mateo, California 94403

Dear Mrs. McInnis:

Thank you for sending the clipping with your letter of October 1. It is distressing to see the kind of distortion that is very characteristic of newspaper headlines dealing with complicated scientific issues. I need hardly point out to you that "transplanting babies" was only an incidental side issue to my talk, and that it was in response to someone else's question. However, I have run into this kind of behavior so often that I find it rather too wearisome to reply to it directly. As to your more specific question about delayed fertilization, I am enclosing the article that raised the issue. I think there is one point in your letter that suggests an area of misunderstanding. The rhythm method obviously permits ovulation to occur in its normal course. It is the time between ovulation and the possible fertilization that is in question when we refer to "aged eggs". (This is quite a different issue than the consequences of ovulation from an aged mother.)

The speculative hazard from using the rhythm method would arise from its failure to prevent fertilization. This can readily occur, as I am sure you well realize, as a result of difficulties in ascertaining exactly when ovulation has taken place. The fertilizations that do occur under these circumstances are very much more likely than the average to involve eggs that were not allowed an opportunity to be fertilized when they were in prime condition, in consequence of absence of intercourse at that time, but still succeeded in being fertilized against the couple's expectations at a later moment.

The newspaper account of my talk made me appear inappropriately dogmatic in my treatment of this subject. It was my intention to present it as a challenge to further research, just as Dr. Welch has done. I would also use it as an example to illustrate the perplexity of deciding exactly what is ever "natural" in any affairs to which humans apply their intelligence.

For my part, the discrepancy between the tone of what I said and the way it was reported in the newspaper is well within the usual bounds of journalistic accuracy, and I would not want to quarrel with the reporting on my own initiative. However, I certainly do not mean to inhibit a response on your part if you feel that the article may mislead others as to the present status of our knowledge of the subject.

Sincerely yours,

JZ Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics